

Windbags

The prospect of a windfall from a windfarm excites an off-grid village in the west, but then the wind turns

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Martin Conneely hefted his bags of turf onto the back of Thomas Conneely's trailer. These Conneelys didn't live under the same roof and they weren't related as brothers or cousins and neither was either of them the father or the uncle of the other but they were related-everyone was. Martin Conneely hefted his bags with an unusual ease that day. There was a lightness to the work, a lightness to everything about him that Thomas Conneely noticed and remarked on. Not too much would pass Thomas Conneely.

'Jaysus Martin will you hould up for a bit. There's a share of time left in the day.' Thomas would never have let time pass any faster than was absolutely needed – a day was only ever worked in order to see it out at the other end at the same rate it began. These men went at a pace that was even and unperturbed, like a rhythm section in a band keeping time, and the world could go on playing its tunes.

'Ah. Okay. Yeah. I've a kind of excited head on me today.'

'What has you excited?'

'Ah it's a kind of . . . you know them yokes . . . that you can't . . . say really.'

'A secret is it?'

'Well to be truthful . . . it is . . . yeah it's a secret kind of a thing I have.'

'Is somethin' the matter with you or what is it?'

'No. No. It's nothin' the matter with me at all.'

'I didn't think it was. The way you were movin'. So it's a good thing so?'

'Well it could be the matter with someone else-'

'I see. Somebody else has set you thinkin'?''

'- but it's not. There's nothing the matter with someone else. As far as I know. I'm just sayin' it could have been that.'

'It could have been. For sure.'

'Right.'

And then the bags came up a bit slower and Thomas was happy with the tad of it. Down at the community centre there was a bit of a commotion. The kettle wouldn't boil and there was no tea for the art teacher who was due any minute. The scheme for a caretaker had been pulled so the women looked to Bat Mortimer, the only man in the retirement group, but Bat wouldn't have been able to fill the kettle never mind fix it. Bat could bore for Ireland about Italian cinema since he got the dish and the Netflix. He was close to Draighnean, the councillor, an Italian opera buff (when he wasn't buffin votes). Together they formed a kind of an Italian cultural society. A sort of a Curia. Draighnean was known locally as His Houliness. Annie, who was Bat's niece even though she was a few years his senior got the screwdriver from the drawer and went at the plug. Nine pairs of eyes decided that the wires were connected properly inside in it.

'The fuse must be gone so.' Annie decided. 'Someone go up to the Centra. They'll have one.'

'Why's the heating off?' Mary K was coming in late after tidying up above in the church. They were all still in their coats and hadn't noticed, but a blast of cold wouldn't get past Mary K. There was a bigger problem.

'It must be the main fuse. Where's the box for it?' Annie was still all action.

'Hold on.' Mary K worked it out. 'We thought the bulb had blown up at the sacristy. And I was wondering why Kuts 'n' Kurls wasn't all go. Anyone tried the lights?' She had been thinking that the young one in the hairdressers must have had a late night. The whole place must be down. She flicked the light switch. 'It's all down. Must have been that wind last night.'

The mobiles came out. Mary K texted- she was the only one who knew how, so nobody ever really answered her. Still. Someone called Edel Joyce at the pharmacy. Someone else called a farmhouse a mile out. All down.

'Shagged again for the day so.' Mikey Walshe kicked his silent compressor up in the garage repair shop. And so it was all over the Dunmaley peninsula, on that last day of autumn.

Martin Conneely slid the bolt on the shed door, the turf safely stashed for the winter. He'd light a fire today too. For the hot water. His only power was the wet batteries for the radio and the oil for the lamps. Thomas Conneely had called out from the old tractor before he left.

'Better go in to that ol' meetin' this evenin'. We mightn't be able to see each other in the dark but we can still hear what's goin' on. Community development me arse. This is sheep and turf country. It's upp'in' the sheep and keepin' the bogs open is all that's needed in it here. Here, what are they goin' to do about the 'lectric?'

Martin raised an eyebrow at the scrawny grey cat and put a soot-caked saucepan of water on the burning turf and went thinking about his secret. Well it wasn't really his secret. He only wished he could tell them all. Festy Conneely, who was genuinely his uncle, would not be too pleased with that. It was Festy's secret at the start, well it was still Festy's secret all the time really, but the bou'l' uncle spilt it to the nephew the night they broke out the new run from the still they had down in the floody cut. They were above in Festy's – that whole shootin' gallery, like Martin's, ran off lamp-oil and batteries. The pair of them must have been the realest of relatives in the whole damn place. Festy scratched a bit of tobacco into his old dudeen.

'C'mere I have something important to tell you. Not for the ears of another sinner mind. There's a . . . I can put me faith in you ladeen can't I . . . we are family?'

'For sure. My lips are stitched.'

'Well there's a . . . Holy Jesus I'll knock seven . . . eight kinds of shite out of you if you breathe a word. There's . . .'

Festy finally got it out between all the slobbering and threats and the whooping at the good fortune in it. 'There's men from Dublin wants the hill-land. It's going to be sold for them wind-things. The yokes for the 'lectric. Draighnean is in on it. For, you know, the plannin' an' all.' Then the black silent stare that put the fear of the ancients into poor Martin. In fairness Festy Conneely could knock as many kinds of shite as he wanted out of most men and he claimed he owned the land all over the mountain. A sign that said "Private Property" suggested he owned the road in too. The sheep had been cut back but he still let Martin at the turf and had kinds of contracts for other lads. He was not a man to be gone behind, not that there was anyone to try, what with him and his twenty cats all alone up in the old mud and tin farmstead, hiding in behind his "Private" signs and "doing his own thing" as the young priest had once said. So revved-up and all that Martin himself felt, down in his own lonely shack in the glen, there was only one thing to do with that ol' secret . . . keep it going.

The 'Maley hall was jam-packed later that evening. Things were coming to a head. The tourist season was over for another year so no one was that busy and with the choir

practice called off just about everyone was free to attend. At least they had the electricity back and there was light and heat and tempers were off the boil a bit, but the mood still simmered nicely. The community council committee sat at the top. Mary K in the chair, Patrick Walshe the Centraman – the garage-man’s brother – and the gaga priest. Draighnean sat in with them. Mary K had her knitting going as usual while she was listening. The meeting got off to a bad start when the retired postman, another Mortimer, started giving off about the closing down of the Post Office. Already a lost cause. It didn’t come out the way he meant.

‘Where in the name of all that’s good an houly is a person to go with their letters.’ ‘The Bun-Bun club above in Coneen’, came a shout from the back and there was unhouly male laughter and stamping of feet. After a bit more unruly back and forward play, things quietened down and there was a complete hush when Mary K put the needles down and addressed His Houliness. She was firing well.

‘So councillor, did you manage to have a kettle boiled for you up in the big-shot town today? I’d say you had no such of a problem. It’s bad enough in this village with having to boil the water before it can be tasted but as to not having the electricity to boil it in the first place? Hmmmh. This is a tourist area and our visitors, never mind ourselves, are not impressed in the smallest way. Tell me when are ye planning to get off your fat behinds and do something about getting a reliable electric supply?’ The cheering shifted the rafters. Festy Conneely had slipped in the back during her speech and Martin had turned during the clapping to find a head on him that said ‘You keep your mouth shut now me boyo.’

The councillor tried to hush them by bringing them into his confidence. ‘I can tell ye that that there are moves afoot that will sort all this once and for all. A solution. Trust me on that. There’s a small bit of planning to be gone through.’

That stoked the fire. What planning? What moves? The consternation spattered from all sides. Draighnean wouldn’t give anything more so the Dunmaley Power Action Committee was set up, with Mary K as chairperson, and a letter was agreed inviting all the local politicians to a meeting. Festy Conneely gave Draighnean the “hope you have this sorted me bucko” look and slipped away with a very bothered head on him.

‘What do you make of them windmills?’ Martin was watching Thomas ratcheting the oil sump back in place underneath the tractor. All he could see were the greasy blue legs of his overalls jutting out from underneath the old red workhorse, like he’d been run over.

'Well,' the voice came up faint with the clicking of the tool 'they are big shaggin' yokes that make a lot of noise and I'm not sure I'd ever like to be standin' under one. There's bolts and there's bolts if you follow my drift. What has you thinkin' about feckin' windmills?'

'Ah I was just wonderin'.'

Thomas tightened the last fixing and slid out. He looked up at Martin. There was a slather of oil on his weathered face.

'Wonderin' what?'

'Ah you know wonderin'. Wonderin' I suppose what them yokes would be like around here. You know.'

Thomas was up on his feet wiping the oil from his jaw with a rag.

'You are some bucko. Wonderin' about windmills. Well I'll tell you those big bastards would be fierce ugly to be havin' around here. Destroy the shaggin' place. Put the frighteners on the sheep and the tourists. No tourin' people would come within an ass's roar.'

'Wouldn't they fix the 'lectric though? And give it to us up here?'

'How in Jaysus's name would they do that? Send the electric off somewhere else is all them feckin' windmills do. Like the wool in the jumpers around here is not from the sheep around here. And look at the amount of them. No. What we need is wires. And better voltage. A new substation. Improvements is all.'

'Oh yeah. I get you. Sure it would go off to the grid.'

'Jaysus you're a fierce student of the windmill altogether. The grid. Is it a secret university or what you're attendin'?''

'Ah no I was just you know –'

'Wonderin'.'

The word spread that there was talk of windmills. A windfarm. A big company doing a deal. The place was surrounded by glens and mountains but no one thought anyone

would be stupid enough to destroy the scenery. Mary K had it that it was to be on the far cliffs at Doonacloigen but Walshe the garageman said the land there wouldn't support it so it had to be in the hills or maybe the vacant strip beside the pitch up behind the brother's Centra. The brother denied it. There was an outcry. The art teacher helped the retirement group with a poster. It had a big moody X of a windmill and "No Blades Running in Dunmaley" in bloody red lettering. Murt Walshe – the Centraman's son – came up with the idea. Annie's daughter thought it was cool, like an album cover for Murt's band Electric Sheep, if they had an album, if he had a band. The call to arms went up all over the peninsula.

Thomas Conneely had a poster stuck on the door of his tractor. Up and down the glen it went amusing the sheep and his scattered relatives, he figured, all bar the one. Festy was far from amused and dropped in to Martin.

'Ya little . . . little . . . little tout – I'll put you down with that Tan War Iscariot, The Plugger Moran.'

'I didn't braethe a word.'

Martin didn't get the hammering, not that day. He was sent off to quieten things down. Change the scent of it. Dispel the rumours. He went away with heavy legs. But of course the more he talked the lighter his head got and the more the suspicion was raised. Pretty soon the story was all about the glen and the slopes of Sleevnamona. Conneely slopes. Old IRA hills. The rumours and the suspicions were whispered fearfully. All the memories hadn't faded yet – sure weren't they there everyday in the rocks and the clods just waiting to be stirred. There was always the "fear" that could block the truth. People still afraid of the loose word like in the stories they had from the Tan War – touts and reprisals – except the shoe was on a different foot so to speak. The Gael might be turning Gall. Natives invading. To hell with it Mary K thought and got on the blower – she was rarely off it in all honesty – and a march was organised up to the Glen.

Festy called Draighnean. 'What about our little arrangement? Where are you at with the plannin'? Them Dublin men will be gettin' edgy.' All of a sudden Draighnean didn't know anything about any arrangement or any planning. And sure wasn't all the talk now against it. There'd be no turbines any day soon. Some people just couldn't keep it shut. Wasn't that always the way? But there weren't "strangers" to hide anything from these days – unless the people themselves? The people. And sure wasn't that what all the fuss was about day one?

An enormous hoop of a rainbow arched into the Glen as the march came up. A hundred or so, driven on by the chanting of the new community choir – basically everyone that could be found, young and old – came up in a procession. Slogans and songs had been quickly rehearsed for the occasion. It stirred memories of the other processions, from the old days. The retirement group, in their waterproof coats and walking shoes, were holding hands at the very front and joined their shy voices to sing “We shall overco-o-ome” They were followed by Thomas Conneely’s tractor with Murt Walshe up on the trailer playing air-guitar in a parody of a windmill – only Murt knew that – and Mary K and the jossor priest on two chairs from the hall beside him. Mary K knitting away and holding on for dear life to her wool and the old padre.

Now and again a sheep would give her one of those concerned looks – the ones they give you when things are a bit confused. Martin Conneely, the lightness back in his limbs now that he was on the right side again, hopped aboard, minding not to trip on Murt’s “cables”, and gave Mary a hand with holding the wool and the priest. Even Draighnean mullocked in – that chancer could disguise himself in the grace of any old thing. He had set up a loudspeaker to make a speech but during the march it belted out Verdi in breaks between the chanting and singing. Bat Mortimer thought he was in a Fellini film. Annie’s daughter was lost in her own kind of psychedelic reverie holding an imaginary guitar case for Murt. A squad car had come the fifteen miles from Coneen and followed them in until it lurched into one pothole too many and gave up.

The spectral band of the rainbow crashed straight into the street between Festy’s tin roofs. The cats were still on his side but had gone to ground. His “Private” signs were no use to him now so he hid under his table with the big marmalade one for company, a terrified man – thinking he had died and gone to hell with the old tout The Plugger himself. That thought alone cured him of his apoplexy, and in fairness led him one day to remorse. There was to be no pot for him. The torture of the chants and the crackle of Verdi’s Hebrew Slave Chorus had him well done for. Maybe the days of lads “doing their own thing” and keeping stuff to themselves and all was over. Try telling that to Murt Walshe and the sheep that chewed and nodded and radiated in time with his humming brain.

Draighnean got the wires in for Festy and Martin, and men and sheep were that bit more content. The “Men from Dublin” were never seen. There were new promises about the electricity and the water treatment. After all that the winds kept on coming, whipping at the tin and knocking off branches and slates and even the power. But it was doing what it had always done and damned if it really bothered anyone too much. Sure

falling down and getting back up wasn't that the stuff of progress? Like the setting and rising of the sun. Like the bad news and the good news you'd be getting on the phone. And what if you did have to batten down now and again wasn't there always a song in the choir and something to be knit. And the wool still coming, like the wind and the power, from some other place. Mary K texted the retirement group. 'Has anyone else noticed the static jumping off this recent wool?' In fairness there was a bit of an extra glow to it after that day of the protest in the Glen.

Fergus Cronin is a native of Dublin. He obtained a degree in Chemical Engineering from UCD in 1972 and has had a variety of occupations since, ranging from experimental theatre to water treatment contracting. Many happy and industrious years were spent in Kilkenny. In 2004 he moved to north Connemara. He has volunteered in the cultural, media, educational and community sectors. He now divides his time between Dublin and Galway. He completed an MPhil degree in creative writing at the Oscar Wilde Centre in TCD in 2014. He has had stories published in Surge, a Brandon Books anthology of new writing from Ireland, The Old Art of Lying (a publication of work from the Oscar Wilde Centre 2014) and The Manchester Review.